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Death and Funeral Services

Okinawans, as so many have thought, are not preoccupied with death, burial customs, and their tombs. The popular criticism that they extravagantly spend all their money building tombs is unjust and comes from a superficial understanding of their function. Memorial observances, not the tombs, are the real sources of expense to surviving relatives.

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The same basic customs were found in all the villages. On the death of an adult, the eyes are closed, the body washed, and fresh clothes are put on it. There is no embalming. The finger nails and hair are cut. (Haircutting is not universal). The body is then placed in a small wooden coffin. This is about 19 inches wide and about 22 inches deep, with the length varying according to height. An average length would be slightly over 4 feet. This is the traditional Buddhist coffin. Placing the body in a coffin this size requires doubling it up. The head rests on a small Japanese type pillow (makura). The legs are bent to bring the knees near the chin, and the hands folded over the chest. Articles for use in the afterworld, okurimono ("sending away things"), are also placed in the coffin. Though the articles vary, they generally include a pair of slippers, a kimono (for a woman), a kimono or western style pair of pants for a man, tobacco and tobacco cases, a towel, and sake in one flask, and water in another. Seven needles are stuck on each side of the kimono or the lapel of a coat. In Munashiro, clogs and slippers are not placed in the coffin, but in front of the tomb at interment. When the coffin is closed, it is turned with the head facing west.

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On death, close relatives up to first cousins are first summoned, followed by relatives in the extended family living in or near the village. There are no hard and fast customs about taking care of the body. First or other sons may take care of a father's body; brothers and cousins of a young girl's; the first son of the mother's; the eldest younger brother of an elder brother's; the first son or the father of a second or succeeding son's. Sometimes female relatives take care of the body. A husband or wife does not perform this duty for the other. The father or the mother prepare the body of a younger child.

Burial follows death very quickly. By law a body must be buried within 24 hours, but the interment is often quicker than this. An adult

- 1 There is confusion whether the head is placed to the north or to the west because the Okinawan word for north is the Japanese word for west.

764 The beginning of a funeral procession is announced by a gong in the yard of a village office. The head man and other leaders and elders of the village attend the funeral. The mayor of the township or his representative joins in the procession.

[793] A Buddhist priest (bōsu-san) did not officiate at this funeral. Priests are scarce in rural Okinawa. Most of them were Japanese who returned to Japan after the war. Families can also save by dispensing with the Buddhist service. The participation of Buddhist priests, already nominal before the war, has now in the villages studied, virtually disappeared.

764 431 It is customary at a death to give a ten or twenty yen offering to the family. The money is put in a small envelop with an expression of sympathy written on it. (In Okinawa money is the usual gift at marriage, birthday celebrations, and at death. The gift may be put in a small envelop but it is common also to give a loose bill).

765 782 Early on the morning following the funeral, the tomb is visited by members of the family. Food offerings of rice, tea, sake, and a flower may be placed in front of the tomb. A charcoal stick is burned. These visits with the offerings and prayers on the following morning are associated with a belief, still held by the old, that the dead person might still be alive and that the pounding of an adult on the wall or the crying of a child might be heard so that the living could be rescued from the tomb. The belief that the person might still be alive and possibly could be heard seems to persist in Henashiro and Hinatogawa. It was not encountered in Matsuda, although it might well exist.

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Burial Places and the Family System

764 Okinawan tombs have excited the interest of foreigners from the earliest days of European contact. There are no cemeteries in the usual sense of the word, but areas scattered throughout the countryside, usually on the tops of hills, or on the stony sides of mountains, are given over to burial grounds. Tombs are not located on land suitable for agriculture. It has been said that the Japanese forbade using agricultural land for tombs, but the practice in Okinawa seems to antedate these Japanese interferences in the culture of the rural areas. In the interior, the tombs are always on wild (penya) land. But one can also see tombs along the seashore and on offshore rocks. The outstanding exceptions to this are the royal tomb area in Shuri, now largely destroyed, and the large and dramatically placed tombs in the center of Itoman town. In the case of Itoman, it is quite probable that the growing town has surrounded the areas taken as tomb sites.

[311] [565] Of the several types of tombs, the turtlesback (kamekokata) is the most famous. It has been variously described by European travellers as

the tomb shaped like a horseshoe or the Greek letter, omega. A great deal of popular lore has accumulated around this type of tomb. Okinawans believe that the shape of the tomb symbolizes the position of a woman giving birth to a child. This is related to another idea, "returning to the source" (moto ni kaeru in Japanese).

Four different but related meanings seem to be involved in the idea of "returning to the source": (1) that life here is but a momentary experience. One's real and permanent life is in the after-world. At death one returns to his permanent home. (2) After death a person becomes a god (hotoke-san) in the Buddhist sense. He reaches this state 49 days after death, according to some explanations, though there is much confusion on this point. This godhood is a "return to the source." (3) At death one returns to a state of peace, and (4) one returns to a former state or to a former place. It is with this last meaning that the turtleback tomb is associated in popular lore with "returning to the source."

On death one returns to the womb of nature from which he came. (Similar lore has collected around the Buddhist coffin in which the corpse is put in a position like that of a child in the womb). Whether the popular explanation is the true one is very hard to say. It certainly should not be accepted without critically evaluating the questions which such an explanation raises. Early European and American observers were quick to point out the similarities between those tombs and those of China, though the fact that they were introduced from China does not rule out the symbolic meaning they might have. Many Okinawans regard these tombs as indigenous. But the Okinawan antiquarians, who so love to find symbols in everything, would be loathe to surrender this lore. It is generally agreed that the tombs were introduced from Fukien province in China. Captain Basil Hall was the first western traveller, I think, to notice the similarity between Okinawan and Fukien tombs. He also mentioned it.

The gable (hafu) type of tomb is very common. There are also small temporary tombs of masonry, more often built of rocks. The tombs of Minatogawa are of this type. There are also very old tombs, hollowed out of the rock of a hillside. These were rare in the villages. Only one was seen in the dense vegetation and undergrowth at the bottom of a deep ravine in the center of Matsuda. Large tombs hollowed out of hillsides are a commonplace, but the small ones apparently were the tombs of the very poor. Recently a new small tomb is being built by families unwilling to undergo the expense of the larger tombs. Tombs, though appearing to be haphazardly placed on mountains or on rocky hillsides, are on privately owned land.

The tombs may also be classified as to use, that is, whether they are intended for a single or the extended family. In Hamashiro, tombs are of the extended family type, located on land owned by the main family. They are the responsibility of the head of the main family. Branch families may contribute to the purchase price of the land, construction materials, and to maintenance.

the Year of the Horse, and so all persons born during any year of the Horse--- 888
1942, 1930, etc.---celebrated their "year day" on the first Day of the Horse 527
of the new year. Although theoretically all year days are important, in
practice only those of old age are given much attention. These are the cele-
brations of the 61st, 73rd, 85th, and 97th years. The 88th and 90th may also
be celebrated. The celebration of the year day of an old person is a matter
of pride for the whole family; formal invitations are sent, and the guests
are served food and drink requiring considerable expense on the part of the
family.

Death After his death a person does not cease to be of any importance to 769
the family. On the contrary he takes on a new importance as a focal
point for ceremonies and perhaps for feelings of anxiety.

Death is attributed to both natural and supernatural causes¹ with 761*
natural causes probably barely in the majority. But there is also the vague
notion that one's life span is predetermined.

Almost immediately after the death of a person, members of his family 756
usually consult a yuta to learn if there was any last request or information 763
that the deceased had wished to impart to his family. This might consist of
an explanation of his death, a confession of some early misdeed, or last in-
structions to his heirs. While I was working at Yamada an informant, an
energetic, thoroughly likeable old lady, died suddenly. I learned later that
her family immediately went to Yakena, some twelve miles away, a place famous
for its many yuta. There they consulted a yuta and asked if there had been
any message the old woman wanted to communicate. They were told that the old
woman had been destined to die a year before but because she was such a good
woman she had lived an extra year, during which she had accomplished every-
thing she had intended to do---there was nothing to reveal. The family was
relieved and comforted.

The Funeral Women may cry out immediately upon learning that a mem- 764
ber of the family has died. The body is laid in the second room of the house
and flexed so that it may be more easily put into the coffin. If the death
occurs in the morning the funeral may be held the afternoon of that day; if
later in the day, the next afternoon. Offerings are placed before the body
and when the funeral is not until the next day, relatives keep a wake over it.

The funeral itself consists of a ceremony at the home of the deceased,
a procession to the tomb, and the placing of the coffin in the tomb. These
steps may be more or less elaborate depending upon the means of the family.
However, the local unit, the 'han' or the chinju, takes responsibility for
some activities, making for uniformity. Member of the 'han' or chinju make
two paper tablets with the name of the deceased written on them and make a
large square wooden box for a coffin. On the afternoon of the funeral, the
body is put into the coffin and a tray containing one of the paper tablets,
offerings of fruit, and an incense burner is placed before it. If the de-
ceased has requested it, a Buddhist priest may be called from one of the lar-
ger towns, but many country people do not call a priest, and indeed may never [743]

¹ See Chapter IX.